C 563 s
no. 44

UNITARIAN BELIEF

III. WHAT DO UNITARIANS BELIEVE ABOUT JESUS CHRIST?

BOSTON
GEO. H. ELLIS, 141 FRANKLIN STREET
1896

SERMONS

OF

JAMES FREEMAN CLARKE.

It is proposed to continue the publication, under this title, of pamphlets by Mr. Clarke, this being the third of a series on Unitarian Belief.

PRICE: Single copies 5 cents each, or three dollars per hundred.

GEORGE H. ELLIS,

141 Franklin St., Boston, Mass.

What do Unitarians believe about Jesus Christ?

"Who is this Son of Man?" — JOHN xii. 34.

WHAT do Unitarians believe about Jesus Christ?

We should more properly say "Jesus, *the* Christ," since the word "Christ" is not a proper name, but an official title, equivalent to "Messiah." No one would say "Jesus Messiah," but "Jesus, the Messiah." So we should say "Jesus, *the* Christ," not Jesus Christ.

What, then, do Unitarians believe about Jesus, the Christ?

The principal distinction between Unitarians and Trinitarians in regard to Jesus, the Christ, is this: Trinitarians say that Jesus was God; Unitarians say that he was a man. Trinitarians say that it is right to worship him as God, pray to him as God, believe in him as the second person of the Trinity. They say that he was essentially God incarnate in man; Unitarians, that he was essentially man united intimately with God. Trinitarians make him a human God; Unitarians, a divine man. Trinitarians call him "God, the Son"; Unitarians, "the Son of God." Trinitarians believe in his deity; Unitarians, in his divinity.

You may, perhaps, ask, "What is the difference between calling him God and calling him divine?" The difference appears to us quite important. We may call Nature divine, because of God's intimate presence in

Nature; but we cannot say that Nature is God. It is divine because God is everywhere and always present in it; and, if we believe that God was everywhere and always present with Jesus, we may say he was a divine man, but that is different from saying that he was God.

Consider for a moment what is meant by saying that Jesus is God. God is the Infinite, Omnipotent, Supreme Being, on whom the universe at every moment depends. Millions of stars are visible to our telescopes,— so far away that light, which moves eleven and a half millions of miles in a minute, is many years in coming from them. But far outside of this is endless space, filled, probably, with infinite multitudes of stars and planets, the homes of intelligent beings in every stage of ascent upward from man toward the throne of the Omnipotent. Above all, around all, beneath all, within all, is the ever-present Being, maintaining order, directing force, supporting law, inspiring life. You say that Jesus was this Infinite Being; that he who is from everlasting to everlasting, without beginning of days or end of years, was born on this planet eighteen hundred and eighty-three years ago; that he was an infant; that he suffered, was tempted, prayed, and died. But since God cannot suffer, cannot be tempted, and cannot die, this seems to Unitarians a wrong use of language.

The Scriptures in a hundred places call Jesus a man; and there is no doubt that by his disciples, during his whole life, he was so regarded. "To us," says Paul, "there is one God, and one mediator between God and man, the *man* Christ Jesus." The Epistle to the Hebrews declares that "he was made in all points like his brethren, yet without sin."

And no one denies this. All admit the perfect human-

ity of Jesus. The only question is, What more was he? Trinitarians say, "Besides being man, he was also God."

What is meant by this statement? It is not the mere words, but the meaning of the words that is important. Look at the meaning, then.

Every one admits that Jesus was not only a man, but that he, like other men, was a single person. "He had two natures," it is said, "divine and human, but only one person." There were not two persons hidden in his human body, one speaking at one time, and the other at other times,— one infinite, the other finite,— but one mind, one heart, one consciousness, one centre of being. When he used the personal pronoun, and said "I," "mine," "me," it was not a double personality, but a single, which spoke. When he said, "My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death," there were not two souls in him, one human and sorrowful, the other divine and incapable of sorrow. When he said, "Father, not my will, but thine, be done," he was not speaking with his human soul to his other soul. It is evident, and it is admitted, that Jesus was a single person, just as each of us is a single person.

Now, this single person, with one consciousness, was not and could not be at the same moment finite and infinite. He could not have all power, and not have all power; have all knowledge, and not have it. The personal being, then, whom we call Jesus must have been either God in union with human nature or man in union with God. But whenever Jesus uses the personal pronoun, and says "I," "mine," "me," he always speaks of himself as distinct from God, and dependent on him. "I can of mine own self do nothing." "My father is greater

than I." "Why callest thou me good? There is none good but one, that is God."

Unitarians, therefore, believe that Jesus was essentially a man, with human body and human soul, our brother, our fellow-man, made in all respects like ourselves. There is where we begin.

"You believe, then," it may be said, "that Jesus was a *mere* man?" That depends on what you mean by a mere man. It depends on the idea you have of human nature. If you consider human nature as necessarily and always low, degraded, sinful, then to call Jesus a man will seem to you a degradation. That is the view of human nature which has been taught and believed for hundreds of years. We have been taught that man is wholly defiled, utterly depraved in all parts of soul and body, in mind, heart, and will. If that is human nature, then no wonder men have thought that Jesus could not be a man, he must be something more. They are almost obliged to contradict the Scripture, and to say that he was not "made in all respects like his brethren," but was an exceptional, supernatural, and superhuman being.

But if the Scripture is to be credited, which says that "man was made in the image of God," which says that "we are partakers of the divine nature," which commands us to "be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect," which teaches that we "are heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ," that we can "sit in heavenly places with Christ" even while here in this world, and which assures us that man is so dear to God that there "is joy in heaven over one sinner that repenteth," then it is no degradation to Jesus to say that he shares with us this human nature, born for so much, capable of so much,

meant for such a lofty destiny. To be "a man" means to be made in the image of God.

And now we Unitarians believe that this was the view taken by Jesus himself. He was, in his own person, the proof that one made in all respects like ourselves might yet be without sin; in other words, that it is not necessary for a man to be a sinner. If Jesus, a man like ourselves, could rise above sin, and conquer it, then we may hope some time or other to do the same. But, if Jesus was a superhuman and supernatural being, then his spotless life is no encouragement to us.

What, then, did Jesus teach about himself? Did he put an impassable gulf betwen his nature and ours? On the contrary, he came down to the humblest, the lowest, as a sympathizing friend and brother. This was what astonished the apostle Paul, and seemed to him one of the wonderful things about Jesus. If I may paraphrase a well-known passage (Philip. ii. 5) in which he urges the Church to imitate the Master, "Jesus, the Christ, though so divine a person, a radiance of God's glory, did not eagerly seize that great honor, but, instead of claiming to be our master, became our servant, willing to suffer and die that we might live."

Unitarians are not fond of discussing the nature of Jesus or his rank in creation. They believe that he was in all respects a man, and they look on him as the highest and noblest type of human nature. He comes to elevate our conception of our race; to show us the possibilities of the human soul; to prove to us by his example that man is not by nature a sinful being, not necessarily selfish or false; that sin is unnatural and goodness natural; that we can, if we will, have a noble and generous aim, and

adhere to it; that we can live out of ourselves for the good of others; that we can live in constant communion with God, fed by his spirit in the depths of our soul. This is the great inspiration which came from Jesus; and it comes to us because we believe him to have been a man in all respects like ourselves, belonging to the same race, and having a mind, heart, and will like our own. But, if we consider him as a superhuman being, if there be a great spiritual gulf between us, then he is no longer an example. We cannot say to each other, "Let the same mind be in you which is in Christ Jesus," if his mind is essentially different from ours. We cannot say, "If any man has not the spirit of Christ, he is none of his," if his spirit and our spirit are radically diverse. But when we feel his great humanity, the fulness of human nature in him, he helps us wonderfully in our own best and noblest purposes.

I sometimes hear people say, as I think rashly and irreverently, "If Jesus Christ is not God, I will throw away my Bible, for I do not want a human Saviour." But shall we refuse salvation because God sends it to us through a human brother? Shall we reject heaven unless we can have it in our own way? Are you sure that you who call Christ God see any more of God in him than I do who call him man? If God has made of this, my dear human brother, a mirror to reflect to me the divine love and truth, shall I shut my eyes and deny this great revelation? "He who has seen me," says Jesus, "has seen the Father!" That I can believe. When I look at Jesus, I am brought into the presence of God. His faith in God is an inspiration to my faith. His perfect confidence in a loving, fatherly presence inspires me with a like confi-

dence. He becomes the channel through which the heavenly love and truth of God descend into my soul. He is the mediator of the highest inspiration which has ever come to man. When I look at him, I look through him to God, his Father and mine.

We believe, then, as the apostles did, in Jesus as the man, the man of men, the type of humanity in its best development. He is more purely human than any other, because the best developed of our human race. If you seek the type of a tree, you do not select an imperfect specimen, but the most perfect one you can find. If you wish for a type of the American elm, you do not take one battered and broken by storm, or one which has been crowded out of shape by surrounding trees, or one which has grown up in a meagre, barren soil. No. But you find an elm standing alone in an intervale of the Connecticut, which has fully developed itself under the most favorable circumstances, lifting itself aloft in a mass of bowery foliage, expanding on all sides into a drooping cascade of delicate branches, a vast green tent, under which the cattle rest, shaded from the hot noon. And so, if you seek the best specimen of the human race, you do not take the stunted savage, or the degraded criminal, or the hard man of the world, or the monastic recluse who has starved his body in order to save his soul, or the narrow bigot who has separated himself from human sympathy by a conceit of his superior piety. No; but you find one in whom head, heart, and hand are equally unfolded,—a man who has been in the world, but not of it; pure from sin, but full of tender sympathy with the sinner; with a love so large as to embrace all mankind, Jew and Gentile, Samaritan and Publican, but also a faithful friend to those

about him; living in closest intimacy with God, a perpetual mediator between the Father and his child; but not making long prayers to be seen of men, not caring overmuch for Jewish Temple or Jewish ritual, worshipping God only in spirit and in truth. You look for one who, sure of immortal being, having eternal life abiding in him, yet devoted himself to all present duties, went about doing good, ready to die, but glad to live. You look for a man of active insight, able to detect shams and falsehoods, not deceived by any pretence, whose chance utterances the world preserves as its daily bread, of whose teaching we never tire, in whose words we find ever new inspiration, but who left behind him no creed, established no formula or philosophy, wrote no books, and gave to those around him the treasures of his wisdom as the sun gives its light, letting it go where it will. We seek a man who lived for no small aims, but for the best good of the whole race; who gave his life with unselfish devotion to help and bless men, whether they would hear or whether they would forbear; and, when death came to put an end to these generous efforts, said, "If it be possible, Father, let me live to finish my work; if not, then not my will, but thine, be done." When we find a man like this, with a life so rounded and complete, we say, This is the type of our humanity, this the true man as God means him to be, a perfect human being, whose life elevates ours, and makes us all better and nobler. Because the most perfect of men, he is nearer to each of us than any other, able to come down to our side, enter into our needs, sympathize with our sorrows, pity our sins. His greatness is not a far-off, mysterious, or superhuman grandeur, but one which we can all understand.

This is true greatness. It is only false greatness which stands on a high, far-off pedestal, or hides itself in some dark, mysterious shrine, to be worshipped with fear and awe.

Unitarians believe in Jesus, and take him for their Master, because he is the best of all guides and helpers. He is Master in no superhuman and exceptional sense, but because he rules us with superior wisdom and more tender love than any other. It is natural for men to follow masters. Every thinker has his master, one whose thoughts feed his soul more than those of any other. The Italians take Dante, the Germans have Goethe, the English Shakspere. Some are followers of Tyndall or Huxley, some of Emerson or Carlyle. Dante called Virgil his master: the artists take Michel Angelo or Leonardo. But the whole civilized world has now, for eighteen centuries, called Christ its Master, because it has found in him the best inspiration, the noblest impulse, the highest influences to quicken, purify, and elevate the soul. So long as he does this, he will continue to be its Master, not by the law of any formal commandment, but by the power of an endless life. He is our Master, because he fills the universe with the sense of an ever-present God, because he fills our dying heart with confidence in an immortal life. We cannot spare him, we cannot live without him; we say, as the disciples said: "Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life."

Unitarians also believe in Jesus as a Saviour, but in the same human, natural, and real way. He is not a theological Saviour, not one who has done something to appease God and make him able to forgive our sin. God, the

eternal love, needed not to be pacified by the death of a victim. All these things seem to us the inventions of theologians. But Jesus is to us a real Saviour, a present Saviour, helping us to escape from real sins. He is a Mediator of the New Covenant, by which we love God, because he first loved us. He brings heaven down to earth, makes the heavenly Father our best friend, walks by our side as a brother, always ready to help us, makes goodness beautiful, and a noble life the object of longing desire. He makes us again like little children, and brings back to us the simplicity of our childhood's heart. He saves us by an inexhaustible tenderness, joined with perfect truth. He is our Saviour, not by any transaction in the other world, but by giving us a new life of faith, hope, courage, and honest endeavor.

> "The healing of his seamless dress
> Is by our beds of pain;
> We touch him in life's throng and press,
> And we are whole again."

Unitarians also believe in Jesus as the atonement; but this, too, not in its theological, but in its human and natural sense. God, who seemed so far off, because of our sinfulness and weakness, he brings nigh; he shows in himself how truths usually opposed may become one. He unites faith with reason, love of God with love to man, consciousness of sin with the sense of pardon, joy in the present life with the expectation of a better, belief in universal law with the presence of a divine providence guiding all things aright. When we are weak, then we are strong; when lowest down, then we are most ready to be lifted up; when serving God, then we become

most free. Christ is the atonement, because introducing unity in the place of discord, because making us at one with God, at one with man, at one with ourselves. He brings peace upon earth, and "o'errules the hard divorce which parts things natural and divine."

Thus, beginning on the ground of a pure humanity, we may rise higher and higher till we find in Jesus the best revelation of God. We therefore differ from the Church chiefly in our method and our phraseology. We prefer the language of Scripture to that of the schools.

The Church begins by declaring Christ to be God, and making this belief necessary for salvation, and then admits that he was also man. It begins at the highest point, and comes down to the lowest. We take the opposite method: by beginning with the humanity of Christ, we learn better to understand his divinity. We follow in this the method of the apostle, who says, "Now, that is not first which is spiritual, but that which is natural, and afterward that which is spiritual." We begin with Jesus as the Son of Man, but we see him also as the Son of God. Unitarians, no less than Trinitarians, may find in Jesus the fulness of the Godhead,— not as a doctrine, but as a real and living being,— and can truly say to him: —

"To our mortal eyes subdued,
Flesh-veiled, but not concealed,
We know in thee the Fatherhood,
And heart of God revealed.

"The homage that we render thee
Is still our Father's own;
No jealous claim nor rivalry
Divides the Cross and Throne."

Unitarians have not been in the habit of praying to Jesus, because he himself has taught us to pray to the Father, and has said, "In that day ye shall ask me nothing." And yet, in our hymns written by Unitarians, we often address Christ as present with us. We say with Harriet Martineau: —

> "Lord Jesus, come; for here
> Our paths through wilds are laid."

With Mrs. Miles we sing: —

> "O thou who art our life,
> Be with us through the strife;
> Thy own meek head by rudest storms was bowed.
> Raise thou our eyes above,
> To see a Father's love
> Beam like a bow of promise through the cloud."

There is no doubt that Unitarians may become so in the habit of feeling the presence of Jesus as a sympathizing friend and brother as to speak with him as though present, asking for his help and counsel, just as we would have asked for it if he were standing by our side. If he were visibly present, we should certainly ask his sympathy: why not, if we believe him invisibly present? When we thus speak to him, it is because we speak through him to God, because we know that he is in harmony with the Eternal Mind, and because no true prayer stops till it has reached the Infinite.

We wish first and last to be honest,— to say no more than we think, to profess no more faith than we have. But, then, we are ready to be led on, led up, just as far as truth and honesty will take us, from things seen and temporal to things unseen and eternal, from the historic

Christ to the spiritual Christ, from Christ the Son of Man to Christ the Son of God. This honesty joined with teachableness translates into life the declaration of Jesus, "Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven."

These pamphlets are sent by the Church of the Disciples, Boston. Any one who wishes for more reading of the same kind is invited to write to

P.O. Mission, The Church of the Disciples,

Corner West Brookline St. and Warren Avenue

Boston, Mass.